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executive editor MATTY SIMMONS

managing editor GEORGE EELS

art director JOHN V. CIOFALO

art editor RICHARD SOMMERS

assistant editor ADRIENNE HELLER

men's fashion coordinator Irving Lieber

contributing editors Franco Borghese, fine foods,
Hunter Barnhall, special features; Skitch Henderson, music;
Elisabeth Knox, winter sports; Ann Holt, fiction

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Blisters in May *The Short Short / by Jack Ritchie*

Dr. Kaufmann wasn't sure he'd heard right. "You mean you want a transfer to the road gang?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

He shook his head. "Fred, you have one of the best jobs inside the walls. You're out of the sun and there's no sweat. Don't you like being a medical orderly?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "But . . ." I shrugged. "I guess you could say that I'd like a change of pace."

He thought about it for a few seconds. "How long are you in for, Fred?"

"Life," I said.

He smiled faintly. "All right, Fred. I'll arrange the transfer. But I'm making book that after a few days with a pick and shovel, you'll be begging to come back. Anyway, I'll keep your present job open. When would you like this change of pace?"

"As soon as possible, sir. If you could make it Monday? That's May 1st."

Before I left my job at the dispensary that day, I put a roll of adhesive tape in my pocket.

On Monday, after breakfast, I fell in with the outside work crew and we marched to the waiting trucks. The gates opened for us and for the first time in nine years I was outside the walls.

The ride was short and I spent the time taping my hands. The trucks pulled up in front of a large ramshackle shed which housed the tools and machinery. We got off and waited in formation while a guard unlocked the double doors. He went inside and a con named Mark Hanson followed him.

After a few moments, the rest of us single-filed into the building. Hanson was in charge of handing out the tools. He marked me down for an ax.

We lined up again outside and waited while Hanson went about the business of closing the doors. He was about to snap the padlock when he looked at the guard and grinned sheepishly. "I forgot my shovel."

Yes, I thought, you forgot it twice a year.

Hanson disappeared back into the shed and came out 20 seconds later with a shovel. He padlocked the doors and fell into the rear of the formation.

We marched a quarter of a mile to the work site and started the day. It was make-work mostly, clearing the scrub pine and cutting pole wood.

At noon, I got my plate filled in the chow line and sat down in the shade of a tree next to Hanson. He contemplated the contents of his plate and I had the feeling he wasn't going to eat what was there. Not today, anyway. When he put down the plate untouched, I said, "How are the hands?"

He glanced at his palms automatically. Blisters were beginning to form. I got out my roll of adhesive. "Try this."

He shrugged a small thanks and accepted it.

"Kind of interesting about your hands," I said. "Every first of May or thereabouts you develop blisters bad enough to have to be treated at the dispensary. Been that way for every one of the four years you've been here."

He regarded me stonily. "So?"

"So the prison keeps a pretty thorough medical record of everything that happens to you—whether it's a sore throat, lumbago, or blisters. It's put down in your file."

"What's all that to you?"

I chewed a piece of my bread and swallowed. "But the thing that really interests me is your appendix. Two years ago, when Dr. Williams was still the medical officer, he took it out. And what do you know, four months ago Dr. Kaufmann had to do the same thing again."

He made sure that we were out of earshot of the other prisoners and the guards before he spoke again. "The records are wrong."

"No," I said. "They aren't. I'm the one who kept them." I tasted the cold tea in my tin cup. "When Mark Hanson went back into the shed alone for his shovel this morning, he had a small rip on the knee of his uniform. When he came out, the rip was gone."

I smiled and said, "The tool shed is outside the walls. It's locked, but not guarded at night. So you slipped inside last night and hid. Maybe under the floorboards or something like that. And when the Mark Hanson with the rip in his uniform got the chance to go back inside alone this morning, the two of you traded places real quick and you came out. How long are you staying with us this time?"

He studied me for a full minute before he made up his mind to admit anything. "May and June. Like always."

I nodded. "So I guess that makes you the real Mark Hanson. But if you can get the other one to do ten months for you, why not the whole year?"

"He's a family man. A wife and kids. He wouldn't touch this deal if it kept him away for the full seven years of my rap."

"Who is he? Your twin brother or something?"

"No. I used him for my double whenever I was worried about some of my friends and what they might have in mind. When this income tax thing hit me, I had a doctor work on him a little to make him even more like my mirror."

I put aside my empty tin plate. "So you get outside. Why don't you stay out? The world's a big place and they don't extradite from Brazil."

He shook his head. "Maybe so, but I got my business interests in the US and they need my touch. I'm running things from behind a door right now, but in a few more years I want to be able to step out without having the Government tap my shoulder again."

He looked at me. "So now we talked. What do you want? Money? Or you'll toddle to the warden with a story?"

"No," I said. "I don't want money."

He frowned. "Hell, you don't expect me to arrange . . ."

"Why not?" I said. "You got the connections and you ought to be able to find somebody with my face."

The guards blew their whistles and we got to our feet.

I rubbed at the pain in my back and then picked up my ax. This kind of work really wasn't for me, and I had the hunch that someone using my name would come to the same conclusion after about ten months and make noises about getting out.

I didn't think I'd hear him in Brazil. Ω